

Why Do I Feel So Sluggish in the Winter Months?

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This week's question comes from E.M. in Water Mill: Why do I feel so sluggish? I had blood tests and my doctor said that they were all fine.

In 1985 a number of folksy descriptions of dysfunction, such as the winter blues, hibernation reaction and winter depression were researched and renamed Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD. It is believed that affected people react adversely to the decreasing amounts of sunlight and the colder temperatures as the fall and winter progress. It is important to note that although seasonal affective disorder usually presents in the fall and winter there are those unlucky individuals who suffer from this condition during other times of the year. As the length of the day changes, some peoples' production of melatonin, the sleep hormone, and other neurotransmitters don't adjust themselves appropriately. As a result, a variety of troubling symptoms may occur.

There is no specific diagnostic test for the disorder. Rather, it is characterized by a cluster of symptoms, which may include tiredness, fatigue, depression, crying spells, irritability, trouble concentrating, body aches, loss of sex drive, poor sleep, decreased activity level, and overeating, especially of carbohydrates, with associated weight gain. When the condition presents in the summer, the symptoms are more commonly insomnia, poor appetite and weight loss, in addition to irritability, difficulty concentrating and crying spells. In severe instances, seasonal affective disorder can be associated with thoughts of suicide.

If this sounds like you, I'm sorry, but the good news is that there are things that you can do about it short of moving to Miami, although with the weather we're having this winter that may not be a bad idea. Anyway, phototherapy, a big word that essentially means replacing your regular light bulbs with full spectrum "daylight" bulbs or buying a light box and sitting in front of it for half an hour a day. Replacing your light bulbs is cheaper and you get the added benefit of happy house plants. Other things that are helpful include getting your vitamin D level checked and supplementing if it is low, taking a natural vitamin B complex "50" with meals 3 times per day and adding an amino chelated magnesium supplement like magnesium orotate 500 mg once per day in the morning can be very helpful. Since SAD is more of a dysfunction than real pathology, Acupuncture can also be very helpful. In more dire cases various drugs may be helpful ranging from anti depressants like Zoloft or Prozac to neuro stimulants like Provigil. In any case you don't have to suffer in silence, get help, get happy and thank God that you don't live in Alaska!

Send in your questions and be well.